THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
Knowing Whom To Obey

John M. Buchanan

July 2, 2000

"Before the word *America* can set one thinking or planning or resolving or defending, it ought to set one dreaming and remembering. And out of this dreamed procession of America as a concrete place will be poured the ingot of a tough and true patriotism ... loving, personal identification with one's own land has never been a breeder of arrogant nationalism. Indeed, a person's love for his or her own land can be the basis of respect for other people's love of their land. Just as only those who have convictions know the meaning of tolerance, so none can assess at right value the land-loves of other people except those who know and deeply love their own."

Joseph Sittler
Grace Notes and Other Fragments

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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KNOWING WHOM TO OBEY
July 2, 2000

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Jeremiah 7:1-7; Acts 4: 13-21 (NRSV)

" . . .We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5:29)

Dear God, we are grateful for a long holiday weekend, and for time to breath deeply and see the beauty of your world. We are grateful for what the celebration remembers, for the gift of our freedom, for the right to practice our faith, and for all those who committed their fortunes, honor and their lives to its preservation. Remind us, O God, that you are the author of liberty; that in Christ you have set us free to live whole and joyful lives. Now silence in us any word but your own. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last Sunday morning Presbyterians from every state of the Union and many parts of the world, 9,000 strong, gathered in the Convention Center Arena in Long Beach, a hockey arena, home of the Long Beach Ice Dogs, to worship God. It was the opening worship service of the 212th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), an annual legislative assembly, family reunion and public celebration. The service itself weaved together the best of our worship traditions—classic hymns and new songs with a reggae beat, liturgical dances, two dear little Japanese American 9 year old girls, standing on a stool at the microphone with a single liturgical stole placed around their tiny shoulders, reading in unison from the prophet Micah—"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" in a way none of the 9,000 will ever forget, the commissioning of 250 new Presbyterian missionaries, a sermon by the retiring Moderator and communion served to all 9,000 of us. It always takes two hours, but it is a memorable experience, which I have not missed many times over the past thirty years.

As we joined the crowd walking to the Arena in Long Beach last Sunday morning, we were greeted by 10 pickets carrying large signs. The first one stunned me: it read, *FAG CHURCH.* The next one displayed a picture of Matthew Shepherd, the young gay college student brutally murdered in a hate crime, surrounded by flames. It announced, "*MATT IN HELL.*" The third proclaimed, "*GOD HATES FAGS.*"

In spite of everything I know about hate groups and in spite of the conventional strategy to ignore and not respond, I could not resist and so approached the middle-aged woman carrying the "GOD HATES FAGS" sign and asked a simple question, "Do you really believe that?" "You bet I do, buster," she barked at me, belligerently which, of course, triggered the less than gentle part of my soul and so I told her what I thought about her theological position. As I walked on

she yelled after me, "Crack your Bible, dummy." Other, wiser worshippers simply ignored her and her friends.

And then, just outside the Arena doors, we encountered another group, a demonstration organized by Soulforce, an ecumenical action group led by Mel White, Jerry Falwell's former speechwriter, who has publicly acknowledged his homosexuality and now works for the full inclusion of homosexual persons in the life of the churches. Soulforce launched a similar demonstration at the Methodist national meeting in Cleveland last month, obstructed the entrance to the hall and several demonstrators were arrested.

Soulforce had told leaders of the Presbyterian Church their intent and promised not to disrupt worship, or even speak to worshippers. So 150 demonstrators stood silently in a large circle, wearing white t-shirts inscribed, "This Debate Must End. Include Us. Ordain Us."

As we approached we saw friends—straight friends, gay and lesbian friends, parents of gay and lesbian men and women, life-long Presbyterians, pastors and lay persons and among them William P. Thompson, distinguished Wichita attorney and former Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, who had traveled to California from Chicago to be part of this public demonstration.

After our worship service began inside, 81 Soulforce demonstrators obstructed the entrance and were arrested by the Long Beach police, a contingent of which were there—they too having been carefully informed of the demonstration's intent. William Thompson, perhaps the most dignified gentleman I have ever known, was one of them—a first for him, I am certain.

The placard carrying demonstrators we first encountered posed no threat to us. But their very presence was a tiny hint of what it must be like, what it has been like, for millions of Christians who have lived, or live today, in countries and cultures, which are hostile to Christian faith and the church.

The night before the Assembly had elected the Reverend Syngman Rhee as its Moderator on the 50th anniversary of the Korean War. Rhee, a life-long pastor and servant of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), told the Assembly about his father's execution for his Christian faith by the North Korean Communists, how at the age of 19, he took his younger brother and fled for his own life into South Korea, leaving behind everything—family, money, home—and how through the offices of the World Council of Churches, he made his way to America and theological seminary and ministry.

The presence of a few unfriendly demonstrators deepened the impact of public worship, deepened the sense of community inside the arena and was an eloquent contrast to the quiet dignity of the Soulforce demonstrators who had decided to make their witness and break the law in order to raise consciousness and essentially because the mainline churches are not responding to the plea—"Include Us, Ordain Us."

Their demonstration reminded me of the long and noble tradition of public dissent, civil disobedience, lodged deeply in our faith tradition and, in addition, the perennial complexity of

the relationship of church and state in our nation, and the precious liberty here extended to all—not to have to submit to state sponsored religion—Thomas Jefferson's "Fair Experiment."

The tradition is an old one. Around 600 BC, a man by the name of Jeremiah walked up to the gates of the Jerusalem Temple and said: "Hear the word of the Lord . . .amend your ways, don't oppress aliens, orphans or widow, don't shed innocent blood."

Jeremiah is not a political official. He's a prophet, a self-appointed spokesperson for God. And when he does it again, takes the nation to task and predicts disaster if God's people do not amend their ways, he begins to attract official attention. In fact, the King's own chaplain, Pashur, has Jeremiah beaten, arrested and put in the stocks for the night. The next morning, Pashur walks to the stockade expecting to meet a chastened, penitent and compliant citizen. Instead, Jeremiah unleashes a stream of invective and tells the startled clergyman that because he has sold out to the political structure, God no longer even knows his name. And so Jeremiah is thrown into prison and at his hearing his accusers say: "This man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against the city." (Jeremiah 26:11)

600 years later, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who was publicly executed for sedition—who are now calling him 'the Christ; God's Messiah,' risen from the dead, are also in trouble with the authorities. Peter and John have been arrested for public preaching and at their hearing they are flogged and ordered to stop teaching in the name of Jesus. The next day they are at it again, arrested again for civil disobedience and this time Peter says one of the most profoundly revolutionary things anyone has ever said: "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

She may not have been thinking specifically of Acts 5:29, but it was surely in that spirit that Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, but sat down in front. And it was in the spirit of Jeremiah and Peter and John and Jesus that Martin Luther King went to jail and wrote a letter to his fellow ministers who could not understand why he was breaking the law. It was in that spirit that martyred Archbishop Romero opposed the military regime in El Salvador and was murdered, and the martyred Guatemalan Bishop and Dietrich Bonhoeffer executed by his Nazi oppressors.

It is a reminder of the precious experiment in religious and political liberty launched here, in Philadelphia 224 years ago this Tuesday, an experiment we still have difficulty understanding, even those of us who are so blessed by it. Significant numbers of Americans apparently still want their government to endorse and support Christian religion, Judeo-Christian religion, monotheistic religion, or as a last desperate resort, religion in general. In Texas, religion and football are something of the same phenomena and high school football games traditionally begin with a prayer, by a Christian minister in the past, and recently, in a convoluted attempt to circumvent the constitution and Jefferson's dream, a "message" by a student elected by classmates. It took the United States Supreme Court to simply tell the truth, namely that people are free here—to be religious—and equally free not to have state imposed religion—any religion.

No one thought it had a chance. Jefferson and Madison wanted to see it happen, wanted to create a republic based on the completely novel idea that state and church should be independent of one

another; that the state should not be reliant on religion for its philosophic foundations and the church should be free of state sponsorship or regulation. No one thought it would work, and for 224 years the Courts had had to protect this "lively experiment," which is what historian Sydney Mead calls us, from zealots who insist that we are a Christian nation, and that the state should sponsor our prayers, symbols, festivals and celebrations, regardless of the faith commitments, or non-faith commitments of others.

Ironically, the separation of church and state has, contrary to expectations, been a very healthy context for religion and religious institutions. Free from state support and control, the churches have thrived and continued to thrive here. And the state—free from the necessity of representing the theological preferences of its citizens—the state hasn't done badly either.

Jean Bethke Elshtain compares the American and French and Russian revolutions in her fine book, *Democracy on Trial.* She writes, "Prisoners of history, the makers of the French Revolution plunged headlong into an orgy of repetitive destruction." In the 20th century, the Bolsheviks did essentially the same thing, imprisoning, exiling and executing any and all who opposed them or represented the old order. The same thing happened in China and in Cuba. The American Revolution alone resulted in more, not less liberty.

And the reason is that this experiment elevates individual conscience—celebrates and, at its best, protects the autonomy and liberty of the individual. Here the state limits itself. Here the state protects the rights of the minority from the convictions of the majority, even though the majority doesn't like it. That's what's at stake when the courts protect a student's or football fan's right not to be prayed over, or a woman's right to access to medical and reproductive services.

Here—liberty is extended to all, and religion is not given preferential treatment, not because we are a godless society, but precisely because those founders of the Republic—most of them believers in God, knew that belief in a sovereign God translates into respect for the individual and the individual conscience.

At our best we have understood that individual rights are at the heart of this experiment and that individuals are to be protected, nurtured, cared for, that because God is sovereign and all people are children of God, there are no unimportant people, no throw away people.

Former Senator John Danforth put it beautifully when asked why we care about the AIDS epidemic raging through Africa. "The answer," he said, "has to do with who we are and how we perceive ourselves. America is more than a place to hang your hat. It represents a value system most of us believe in very strongly. That value system has to do with the worth of human beings, wherever they are. We believe that lives are worth saving." Individual freedom—freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, is at the heart of it.

Several years ago I was in Cuba, visiting our partners in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Cuba, a small, wonderfully faithful denomination that has learned how to live in a system that was openly hostile to religion. That is changing now and there is a new openness and new freedom in Cuba today. But for years it was very difficult to be a faithful Christian and a loyal

Cuban. Known Christians could not be members of the party and thus were denied access to positions of leadership or advancement in government, business, banking, education, medicine. Government representatives attended worship, took notes, tape recorded sermons, took names. Printing materials of any kind was against the law. Social services were illegal because the state would take care of everyone. Seminaries and schools were carefully monitored or simply taken away from their church owners and transferred to state ownership and control.

When an occasion for privacy presented itself, I asked a leader of the Cuban church how it was personally for him. He is a professor. His son, he told me, was a good athlete, a basketball player who had earned a position on the University of Havana varsity team. The team was about to leave on a state sponsored tour of Eastern block European cities and universities. The coach called the young man into his office and told him that because he was a known Christian, a member of the Presbyterian Church, he could not represent Cuba on the University of Havana team and could not travel to Europe. On the other hand, if he publicly denied his faith and disavowed the church, he could make the trip. I'm a father. I know a little bit about how difficult this choice would be for a fine young athlete with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "What did he do?" I asked. And my friend, now with tears streaming down his face, explained that his son had denied his faith, traveled to Europe. But something happened. He left the team and disappeared, and at that time, several years after the fact, had not been heard from.

So once a year we remember who we are—and how we are blessed—here—to be free—to choose to obey—the author of our liberty.

> "To Thee we sing;
> Long may our land be bright
> With Freedom's holy light
> Protect us by thy might,
> Great God, our King"

Pastoral Prayer
July 2, 2000
The Reverend John Wilkinson

Almighty God, who has given us this good land for our heritage: we humbly beseech you that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of your favor and glad to do your will. Bless this land with honorable industry, sound learning and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord and confusion, from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties and fashion into one happy people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Enlighten and direct those whom you have placed in power, that their counsels may be filled with knowledge and equity, and the whole commonwealth be preserved in peace, unity, strength and honor, and that, through obedience to your law, we may show forth your praise to the nations of the earth. In times of prosperity fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble suffer not our trust in you to fail.

And now, gracious God, we bid you to incline your ear to these petitions, that in their speaking and in their living, our prayers may find your hope. For this nation, for the journeys of many generations to our shores and for our common life. For those who fought for our freedom centuries ago, and for those now whose duty it is through service to this nation to protect and defend us, for men and women in armed services in this land and stationed around the globe. For efforts at peace and reconciliation around the world: North and South Korea, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, for places elsewhere and everywhere who seek the delicate things that make for peace. For the churches of the world and the churches in this land. For our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) having now just gathered in General Assembly, for actions taken, for fellowship nurtured, for challenges of faithfulness and hospitality placed now and ever before us. For children, for families, for friends, for beloved ones. For those who are ill this day, facing disease. For those facing loneliness or addiction or anxiety or depression, and our call to live in solidarity with all your children who wander and suffer this day. For those whose days are numbered and who face the last moments of their journey on earth, and for those who walk faithfully with them.

God of purple mountains, of patriot dreams, of shining sea, of pilgrim feet, of city street and fruited plain and wilderness, of God of every heart and every hope, hear now this prayer. Shed your grace upon us, that our lives may be crowned with good, living for the day when all will know the freedom and liberty you intend and all your world will sing sweet freedom's song, the melody of peace. For we pray in the strong name of Christ Jesus our Lord, who taught us to pray together with one voice by saying…